

Society: a colonial history of the concept

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Abstract

There is perhaps no more frequently cited concept in modern thought to have excited so little historical investigation as 'society'. Conventionally, scholars trace the origins of modern understandings of 'society' to Enlightenment philosophers for whom 'society' referred to the realm of essentially unforced though heavily regulated interaction between autonomous individuals. On this reading, the concept of 'society' imbibes both the repressive connotations of regimes of self-discipline, and the liberating potential of unforced interaction. I will argue in this paper however, that such a reading misses the colonial history of the concept, which shows a darker side to the concept and its history. By focusing on early British colonization in Australia, it will be argued that colonial efforts to govern the Indigenous inhabitants by 'civilising' them, were premised on the view that the British were 'fitting' the Indigenous peoples of Australia for 'society'. The colonial history of the concept thus reveals that early European notions of society were premised on 'civilization'. Civilisation was the process which ensured that individuals could be made capable of 'society', and thus society itself could only be understood as an artifact of regulation, government and control.

Key Words

Society, Indigenous people, civilization, colonial, government.

Introduction

In his 1787 *History of New Holland*, Sir William Eden, Lord Auckland (1787: xx), argued that transportation of convicted felons to the distant colony could be justified as the means by which to civilise 'the Indians', quite aside from its remedial effects on the felons themselves. Eden (1787: xix-xx) admitted that:

To carry amongst the rude inhabitants of New Wales [sic] a picture of society, which, though its features may be harsh to the ideas of an European, will appear even for the present a degree more perfect than any subsisting among them, would of itself be an act suitable to the beneficence of a civilised power... an endeavour worthy of a polished age...

We can note here that Eden saw transportation not only as a means of exporting felons for punishment, but of exporting society itself. Moreover, while the 'society' of felons may have been thought harsh by polished and refined standards among the educated

elite who consumed Eden's *History*, it was nonetheless far superior to the rudeness and ignorance in which the 'savages' lived. Here Eden combined the recurrent themes in the ideology of British imperial expansion, civilization and benevolence. In this paper, I want to examine one important, if often overlooked element of this language of civilization and benevolence.

As a goal of colonization, civilization involved the effort to re-construct Indigenous peoples in line with European expectations. It has sometimes been assumed (Windschuttle 2002: 186) however, that 'civilization' is a term that simply describes an alternative social condition to that exemplified by Indigenous people, often referred to in colonial literature as 'savagery'. Terms such as 'civilisation' and 'savagery' however, were not simply descriptions. They were used to *portray* colonists as 'superior' to Indigenous peoples who were thereby defined as a 'problem' for civilized government. Among the chief 'problems' Indigenous people were thought to present was indeed how to 'fit' a people without 'society' for taking their place in the lower orders of colonial society. Enquiring into the history of the concept of 'society' in colonial discourse reveals that it was not simply construed as an independent domain that 'civilisation' acted upon, but was understood to be an artifact of a process of civilization, and therefore was used as a key criterion to differentiate the 'civilised' from the 'uncivilised'.

The Concept of Society

The history of the concept of society has excited surprisingly little attention. The conventional approach (Hamilton 1995: 83-6; Mayhew 1968: 578-9) traces its origins to European Enlightenment efforts to envisage a realm of autonomous interaction based on the common pursuit of self-interest. In this sense then, 'society' is conceptualised as a realm of intersubjectivity shaped by the essentially unforced pursuit of the particular and common interests of its members, whose conduct has been shaped by a range of formal and informal regulatory regimes (law, education, labour, social sanctions). In Western European thought in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries however, 'society' could be used in a variety of contexts. It could refer to the attainment of a certain stage of historical progress or civilisation, but could also be used to refer to more restrictive types of association. The first sense of

the term 'society' may be labelled 'general' in that it refers to something like Dr Johnson's ([1755]1963: 388) definition of society as the '[u]nion of many in one general interest'. The second sense may be termed 'particular' in that it implies different and mutually exclusive 'societies' within the one (general) society. In other words, society in the particular sense refers to 'polite society' or the bad society of the poor, idle and dissolute that so haunted early social reformers.

According to Otto von Gierke (1957: 44-46), the term 'society' emerged from the concept of *societas* which had been used by natural law theorists in seventeenth-century Europe to define their conception of 'the people', and the political claims they made as individuals against the majesty of rulers. *Societas* thus came to denote a purely collective association in which each separate individual was understood to be the bearer of rights, whose union was founded on contract. Baker (1994: 101) argues that the term 'society' entered French discourse in the seventeenth-century, but by the eighteenth was coming to be used to describe forms of association based on individual rights opposed to and 'endangered' by the obligations of the 'Old Regime'. Baker (1994: 108) contends that from the late seventeenth-century, the 'particular' sense of the term society is replaced by the 'general' understanding of society as 'the basic form of collective human existence'.

In this 'new' understanding, society (in the 'general' sense) was constituted by the assemblage of autonomous individuals (Hundert 2000: 31-47). Mary Poovey (2002: 130) has suggested that the general sense of 'society' as a complex assemblage of different 'objectified domains' governed by their own internal dynamics emerged in British thought in the late eighteenth-century. Poovey (2002: 136) suggests that the development of a market economy in particular required individuals to adopt a new orientation toward others whose combined actions constituted the 'society' in which they lived.

Such developments convinced Europeans in the late eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries that the 'superiority' of their 'civilisation' rested on their new kind of 'society' (Phillipson 2000: 70-84). As a consequence, British and French writers (for example Montesquieu [1748]1989: 290-92), could speak of their own 'civilised' societies (literally, civil societies) as different from and far superior to the

associations, 'tribes', 'clans', or 'nations' of 'barbaric' and 'savage' peoples. Exporting 'civilisation' thus involved imparting their own form of sociality to others, and thereby to 'fit' them for entering, usually at its lower levels, a transplanted form of European society. In this sense, the project of civilisation encompassed the government of problematic forms of society (in the particular sense) both within Europe (the poor, the disorderly, the masses), and of the extension of their own society (in the general sense) to other parts of the globe.

Throughout the early colonial period, the civilisation of Indigenous Australians revolved around their (re-)formation as 'social' subjects. This formation involved a host of governmental techniques focussed on reshaping their collective or social life through the inculcation of new family relations, habits, and routines of labour. The construction of such highly regulated communities had already been advocated for the poor in Britain by social reformers aiming to curb what they saw as the 'shocking Corruption of Morals' among the lower orders of society.¹ The concept of society that informed such schemes was one in which various lower orders may be said to be 'of society', but not necessarily 'in society' with those in more elevated levels.

The most common problems that were thought to beset life 'in society' were those emanating from the 'bad habits', unrestrained passions, or want of appropriate conduct of particular categories of people, especially the so-called 'idle poor'. Such views implied that social order (or its absence) was determined by the manners of autonomous agents (Helliwell and Hindess 1999). It was with something very like this view that a number of social reformers in Britain showed their concern at the state of 'society' among the 'lower orders', focussing on the need for prisons and regular police (Buchan 2002: 201-18). This framework established at home set the pattern for British colonization abroad. In Australia however, the British found peoples they regarded as 'savage' and hence as exhibiting only the most rudimentary form of collective life. The key objective of early schemes for 'civilisation' in Australia was to overcome the 'problem' of how to 'fit' the Indigenous inhabitants for life in society.

The ‘problem’ of Indigenous sociality

Early colonial policies revolved around the ‘problem’ of Indigenous sociality, a form of collective life that Europeans contrasted to ‘society’. Early European observers noted that the Indigenous people lived in ‘tribes’ or extended family groups, but that they could not be described as ‘societies’. Indigenous sociality was regarded as highly problematic not simply because it seemed utterly mysterious, but because of its apparent egalitarianism and absence of obvious rulers or chiefs (Nind 1830-31: 40-41). Administrators believed, at least initially, that they could resolve this problem by appointing Indigenous chiefs. As others noticed however, Indigenous people had no notion of private property and hence did not rely on rulers either for protection of property or distribution of largesse. Consequently, Europeans attempted to resolve this problem by distributing goods (such as blankets, clothing, and foodstuffs) to induce a sense of obligation, and a desire to obtain more. Such distributions apparently failed to have the desired effect of instilling respect for private property, and became a supplement to Indigenous means of subsistence (Bellinghausen [1821] MCMXLV: 188-89).

Under these circumstances, Europeans regarded the apparent absence of Indigenous government to indicate an absence of society itself. David Collins ([1798]1971: 544) wrote of the Indigenous people he encountered as ‘living in that state of nature which must have been common to all men previous to their uniting in society and acknowledging but one authority.’ According to European thought, the manners of ‘uncivilised’ or ‘savage’ peoples were determined by the nature of their subsistence. Collins ([1798]1971: 253-4) for example, reported that Matthew Flinders was of the opinion that:

...the native who depends upon his fiz-gig or his spear for his support depends upon his single arm, and, requiring not the aid of society, is indifferent about it, but prowls along, a gloomy, unsettled, and unsocial being.

Such views implied that relations within the tribes were determined by their nomadic patterns of life, almost invariably described by colonists as an ‘erratic’ way of life characterised by an undisciplined ‘wandering’ through the bush. Having been raised in such ‘erratic’ communities, colonial observers believed that individual Indigenous people were trained from early childhood in ‘erratic’ habits. This was the foundation

of the 'problem' Indigenous sociality, the persistence of a framework of ideas and attitudes in the minds of Indigenous people that Europeans attributed to their means of existence. As Malaspina (King, 1990: 106), the Spanish visitor to the early colony put it, it seemed an open question 'whether or not' the Indigenous inhabitants 'are able to combine with the sociable Instinct of Man' or surrender to their desire to return to the bush 'divested it would appear of all sociable attraction.'

In order to civilise the Indigenous people, Europeans felt that it was necessary to prevent them from living in their 'erratic' or traditional ways, to 'settle' them in one place, subject them to regular routines of discipline, inducing them to accept a more 'settled' way of life based on the inculcation of 'settled' habits (Haebich 2000: 65-130). In doing so, Indigenous 'civilisation' was seen in terms of their social (re-)formation. One of the earliest references to this policy was Governor Macquarie's dispatch of 1814, in which he maintained that the Indigenous people had '[s]carcely Emerged from the remotest State of rude and Uncivilised Nature...' held back by their 'Wild wandering and Unsettled Habits'.² Nonetheless, he held out hope that the 'sociality' with which they lived alongside the white settlers may allow a 'Degree of Civilisation' by inculcating a 'sense of the Duties they owe their fellow Kindred and Society in general...'. Macquarie's communication was accompanied by a proposal from Mr William Shelley to establish one of the first Indigenous institutions. Here Shelley made reference to Indigenous people who had lived for a time in 'civilised Society', but had 'relapsed into their former habits and Society'. The problem Shelley set out to resolve was how to 'civilise' the Indigenous people, how to ensure that they were properly trained so that their attachment to their 'new Society' would endure, and eradicate the 'habitual' attachment to their old 'society'.

Shelley's reference to society thus encompassed the two senses of the term current in British discourse at the time. Referring to the Indigenous people and their relationship to 'society', the problem was two-fold. First, the 'society of' (or associations between) Indigenous people had to be broken, in order that they could then begin to take their place in civilised 'society'. Throughout the early colonial period, Europeans regarded individual Aboriginal people, as potentially useful labourers, and often praised their personal qualities of justice, honesty, generosity, sagacity, or tenderness.³ The 'Aboriginal problem' however, was posed in terms of their forms of 'sociality', in

what one colonist called ‘...their perfect social degradation, with no combination, no government, no home.’⁴

Conclusion

Such comments reflected a broad consensus among colonial administrators by the 1840’s that no advance in the ‘social condition’ of the Indigenous people could be evinced because they were incapable of ‘moral improvement’. Linking ‘social’ to ‘moral’ improvement was another way in which Europeans distinguished their own ‘society’ from ‘inferior’ forms of association. The key distinction between European ‘society’ and Indigenous ‘tribes’ rested on the norms appropriate to the inter-subjective relations between the autonomous inhabitants of society. The inhabitants of tribes were thought subject to an entirely different set of norms premised on its corporate character. The ‘society’ that colonial administrators aimed to impart to the Indigenous people was an artefact of governmental activity held together by a framework of internalised norms toward which each individual member was able to orient their activity through their own processes of reason.

As the colonies moved toward self-government after mid-century, the scene was set, as a report of 1849 put it, for the development of more rigorous policies of ‘vigorous coercion’, ‘Military discipline’, and the ‘actual and total separation’ of Aboriginal children ‘from their parents... natural associates’ and the lands and influence of their tribes.⁵ Interestingly, one of the contributors to this report was C.J. La Trobe, who, as the Chairman of the ‘Societies for Promoting Christian Knowledge’ (and later Governor of Victoria), took the view that the colonisation and settlement of Australia’s vast landmass presented a more intractable problem for society. The problem was the severe moral dangers to Europeans in the bush, removed from the ‘restraints and checks which Society imposes’, surrounded as they were by what he called, ‘degraded and untutored Savages’.⁶ La Trobe’s comments implied that society and its restraints were fragile constructs, and that subsequent colonial Indigenous policy must accomplish more segregation and more invasive control in the effort to ‘fit’ Indigenous people for life in ‘civilised society’.

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Footnotes

¹ Discussion in this section is based on, *British Parliamentary Papers, Crime and Punishment: Transportation* 1, House of Commons Select Committee on Finance and Police, Including Convict Establishments, 1798 (re-printed 1810); Report From the Select Committee on the Laws Relating to Penitentiary Houses, 1811; Report from the Select Committee on Transportation to New South Wales, 1812, Irish University Press, Shannon, 1969; *British Parliamentary Papers, Crime and Punishment, Police* 2, Second Report From the Committee on the State of the Police of the Metropolis, 1817, Irish University Press, Shannon, 1968.

² *Historical Records of Australia*, volume VIII, p 370 (subsequently HRA).

³ For example, see: Reverend Threlkeld in *R. v Boatman or Jackass and Bulleye*, Supreme Court of NSW, 10 February, 1832, <http://www.law.mq.edu.au/scnsw/Cases183...html/>; E.J. Eyre, *Journals of Expeditions of Discovery into Central Australia*, T.W. Boone, London, 1845, Volume 2, facsimile, Adelaide, 1964, pp 211-213.

⁴ *British Parliamentary Papers, Colonies Australia* 2, 1841, Irish University Press, Shannon, 1968, p 214.

⁵ *New South Wales Votes and Proceedings*, Vol II, Report From the Select Committee on the Aborigines and Protectorate and Appendix, p 419-420, 1849.

⁶ *HRA*, XXIII, Report of the Port Phillip District Committee of the Societies for Promoting Christian Knowledge and for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign parts... of the Port Phillip District, July 29, 1843, p 65.